MOOTWINGEE NATIONAL PARK: A CASE STUDY

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The Mootwingee Blockade

Probably the best known case of conflict over site management in Western NSW is the blockade by Aboriginal people in 1983 of the Historic Site in Mootwingee National Park. The Historic Site is a small but important part of Mootwingee National Park and it contains a major rock engraving site, shelter art, many large campsites, and sites of special spiritual significance to Aboriginal people who are associated with the Mootwingee area. Mootwingee is very special to Aboriginal people because it was major ceremonial centre where people from all over the Lake Eyre Basin, Western Queensland, the Flinders Ranges and Western NSW met for ceremonies and exchange of goods, songs, dances and ideas. The hundreds of art sites in the area reflect the special spiritual significance of this place where many dreaming tracks meet. The large campsites around the base of the hills near the art sites show that in the past many people camped at Mootwingee.

The main reasons for the blockade were;

1. Visitation and management problems at the main engraving site which were resulting in damage to the engravings, the nearby campsites, and to the “special feel of the place” or the spirituality.

2. Visitation and management problems in the rest of the Historic Site, especially the fact that the walks took visitors (unguided) to known sacred sites including a men’s initiation site and a site of special significance to women.

3. The fact that the visitor’s campsite was within the Historic Site and very close to special sites.

4. Mootwingee was being presented to the visitors as a relict of an extinct people. That’s why I always joke that I am a relict from the past.

5. The fact that nobody had consulted with the Aboriginal people over management of Mootwingee National Park and that no Aboriginal people were permanently employed out there, even though Aboriginal people had provided the main workforce on Mootwingee and other stations in the area until about 20 years before this. This meant that a major Aboriginal ceremonial centre was being run as a tourist attraction by whites and for whites. In 1983 the situation had not changed much since the 1940’s when the Broken Hill Barrier Field Naturalists took a group of interested people to the Historic Site and got an anthropologist whose closest connection was working in the Kimberlys, to interpret the rock art.

After a series of talks with national Parks the Aboriginal people agreed to open the Historic Site to visitors again.

The main changes agreed to include:

1. only guided tours within the Historic Site, and visitors on each tour would be limited;

2. two special sites of concern were taken out of the tour;

3. the visitor’s campsites were moved to another location;

4. a Management Plan was written for the park in consultation with the Mutawintji Land Council;

5. the Mutawintji Land Council to be consulted on all future management;

6. National Parks undertook to employ Aboriginal people in the Park and to take guided tours to give an Aboriginal view on the natural and cultural history.
What happened after the blockade?
While National Parks have agreed in principle to joint management and to employ Aboriginal people at Mootwingee, it is true to say that many promises have been broken and there have been continuing problems caused by a lack of understanding of Aboriginal cultural values.

1. Employment

Nearly 10 years later there still has been no full time employment of Aboriginal people at Mootwingee. Employment has been restricted to casual work for a few weeks here and there, and in the last few years Seasonal Rangers paid for by sponsors and employed only in the school holidays.

The trainee ranger program has resulted in employment of more Aboriginal people in NPWS and there are now 3 fully trained Aboriginal ranges in Western NSW, one based in Broken Hill. However, this does not fill the need for Aboriginal people with close association and traditional knowledge of the area to be employed at Mootwingee. In fact trainee rangers are chosen for their educational standard and work experience rather than their knowledge of community and culture or their association with and wish to care for places like Mootwingee.

The structure of NPWS is changing to make it even more difficult for Aboriginal people with strong association and traditional knowledge to fit in the system. Even the new intake of Aboriginal Sites Liaison Officers will have to undertake a degree course as the trainee Aboriginal Ranges have to. Gone are the days when knowledge of my own community, culture, land and language got me a job in NPWS. While other States are recognising that Aboriginal people with traditional knowledge and association have an important role in management of sites and land, NPWS seems to be moving even further away from this in its employment of Aboriginal people. We need to fix this problem by having positions in NPWS specially for Aboriginal people who may not have a great education but love and understand their country.

2. Consultation

The consultation with the Mutawintji Land Council has been patchy for a number of reasons, including poor or no funding for the Land Council, the lack of understanding of some NPWS staff over what is proper consultation, and politics among the Aboriginal people.

An ongoing problem with the consultation is that middle level management make decisions, decide on a plan and then inform the Mutawintji Land Council or one or two elders and think that is consultation. When faced with this Aboriginal people tend to just walk away or sit there and say nothing, and this is sometimes interpreted by NPWS staff as agreement!

Another major problem has been the difficulty for Aboriginal people, especially elders, to attend meetings without funding at Mootwingee which is 130 km from the nearest towns.

The Cultural Centre is a good example of poor consultation. This is located in the Historic Site only 400m from the main engraving site, which many Aboriginal people think is wrong for a start. A lot of money was paid to a consultant to do the display but he did not properly consult the Mutawintji Land Council or our elders and did not finish the display. Because of this the Cultural Centre does not really tell people about us in a way that can be easily understood.

3. Site Management

There have been some conflicts over management of sites, both within the Historic Area and in the rest of the Park. One example is the footpath to the main engraving site. Before and after the blockade the tourists were able to walk along the creekline to the Engraving Site, cutting deeply eroding tracks through the prehistoric campsites. As visitation increased this was seen to be a problem and NPWS decided to put in a footpath. The Mutawintji Land Council was consulted and we were asked to decide on a route for the footpath which we designed to keep away from the campsites and to approach to site on the side rather than head on. It was agreed that local material would be used for
construction. However, to our dismay work started on the footpath using grey concrete and crushed rock (called "cracker dust" by the locals) from Broken Hill, 130km away. It was an ugly sight, a grey, straight footpath in such a beautiful place where all the rocks and soils are oranges and yellows.

This upset the Aboriginal people, not only because of the ugly look of it, but because it was made from crushed rock from Broken Hill. Mootwingee is made of orange sandstone but the rock from Broken Hill is an ancient grey rock. One of our main stories features both places. Broken Hill is where in the dreamtime God Kuluwirru punished all the people who broke the laws and many people were killed and their bodies formed the rocks and their blood formed the silver, lead and zinc. Mootwingee is the place where Kuluwirru tested out the people and found them able to obey his laws and he rewarded them by killing a giant kangaroo to feed them in the drought. So to us NPWS was bringing the bodies of the bad people and spilling to over one of our most sacred places at Mootwingee. The irony is that this story is told in the Cultural Centre where the footpath started from. NPWS paid a white artist to paint the story in a long mural and NPWS staff wrote up the script from the work of an anthropologist who worked with our elders many years ago. But did they really listen to the story? Anyway after a lot of hassles we sorted all this out, the cracker dust was pulled up and some Aboriginal people were paid to help put in a footpath designed by us and made out of the natural rock from the area. This could have all been avoided if Aboriginal people from the area were employed at Mootwingee when all this happened.

4. Goat Control

The method of controlling goats is to have several helicopter shoots a year. This means that goat numbers build up and then several thousand are killed at once, but this method is very expensive and doesn’t do enough to protect our sites and the yellow-footed rock wallaby. The goats are an issue with Aboriginal people because of the damage they are doing to all kinds of Aboriginal sites in the Park. They camp in rockshelters and destroy the art in the shelters by rubbing against the walls, scraping their horns on the walls, kicking up dust and their manure and urine eats away the hard outer skin of the rock which then rots away. They trample all over the rock engraving sites with their hard hooves and large areas of engravings have just disappeared. They piss in the sacred rock holes and just the smell of all this spoils these special places. Aboriginal people feel that they can be more involved in goat management and would like to see NPWS allow Aboriginal people to control the goats by mustering, trapping and shooting all year round.

To Aboriginal people the goats are destroying the spirituality of Mootwingee, not only the art sites but the special sites next to the art sites, for example the sacred rock holes which were created by Kuluwirru and the Ngatji or rainbow serpent. We would like to see the most important places fenced in with goat proof fences, but the fences have to enclose the whole of the special area, not just individual art sites.

To us, the history and spirituality of a place is more important than the art itself. If the art is destroyed by natural processes, this does not destroy the importance of the place to us, only to white people. We feel it is more important to protect the surrounding landscape and associated sites than to preserve the art by ugly gridding etc. This is why we find it so sad that there is no shortage of funds for white people to painstaking record the art or date it, but where is the money to record what our old people know about Mootwingee?

Future Management

Legislation allowing Mootwingee National Park to be handed back to the Aboriginal people of the area is in the final stages of being accepted. We will have to lease it back to NPWS straight away, but this will enable us to have a majority of Aboriginal people on the management board. This is the best thing that has happened to us in Western NSW for many years. We will be able to manage our sites in a proper way with the help of NPWS - but in such a way that puts our cultural values first. I believe that Mootwingee will become a place where white people and urban Aboriginal people will be able to come and see how we can manage our
sites and land jointly with NPWS and teach people about our culture.

I think we are beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel, and we have this week negotiated for the Park Worker position at Mootwingee to be made an Aboriginal position which will be filled soon. Many visitors and a lot of NPWS staff have supported us in our struggle to manage Mootwingee as a special Aboriginal place where everyone can come and learn about the Aboriginal way of life.